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Roger Williams University School of Law

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January 5, 2017

Newsroom

Undocumented Licenses, Safer Roads

RWU Law, Latino Policy Institute study finds that issuing driver's licenses to undocumented Rhode Islanders would mean safer roads, better opportunities



PROVIDENCE, R.I., January 5, 2017 – Issuing driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants in Rhode Island would lead to safer roads and potentially better economic opportunities, according to a legal and policy analysis that the **Roger Williams University School of Law** and the **Latino Policy Institute at RWU** released on Thursday.

The analysis found that Rhode Island has the largest percentage of uninsured motorists in New England, and the state contains an estimated 30,000 undocumented immigrants.

In all, 14 jurisdictions – including 12 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C. – provide standard or alternate driver's licenses to their undocumented populations. The study found that states providing driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants don't see a massive influx of immigrants, but they do have fewer traffic fatality rates on average and lower average costs for auto insurance. The study also found that poverty rates tend to decline at a faster rate in states that provide driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants.

The study cites an AAA Foundation report that unlicensed drivers were 19 percent more likely to be involved in a fatal car crash. "The completion of driver's education and passing of a driving test would ensure that all drivers on the roads are aware of the driving rules and laws of the road, thereby making it safer for all to drive," the report states.

The study analyzes how other states have handled driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, saying, "States with a lenient approach invite fraud and free-riding by residents of other states. States with a strict approach discourage bona fide applicants, and thus jeopardize the public safety and economic benefits of granting driver's privileges to undocumented individuals." Legislation proposed in the past in Rhode Island falls into the "moderate" category that strikes the right balance, the report says.

"This comprehensive analysis by researchers at Roger Williams University confirms that issuing driver's licenses to undocumented Rhode Islanders can improve public safety for everyone," said **Rhode Island Governor Gina M. Raimondo**. "I remain committed to addressing this important public safety issue and hope to work with the General Assembly to provide a path for undocumented Rhode Islanders to obtain drivers' licenses."

"I am proud to see LPI continue meaningful and thought-provoking research on Latinos in Rhode Island," according to **Providence Mayor Jorge O. Elorza, a former RWU School of Law professor who co-founded the Latino Policy Institute**. "I am especially appreciative of their research on the benefits of issuing driver's licenses to all of our residents, regardless of immigration status. I support driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants because it is a matter of equity, and it is also a matter of safety. By properly educating and insuring all of our drivers, we create safer roads for everyone."

"As a University with the state's only law school, and in conjunction with our Latino Policy Institute, Roger Williams University was pleased to prepare an analysis of the impact of issuing driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants for consideration by the Governor and the General Assembly," said **RWU President Donald J. Farish**. "Helping lawmakers craft sound policy based on research is something that we at RWU accept as our responsibility, especially because we see ourselves as a private university that serves a public purpose."

"Given the uncertainty of a new federal administration and what may be their policy priorities, it is imperative for Rhode Island to consider making policy change based on evidence and best practices," according to **Anna Cano Morales, director of the Latino Policy Institute at RWU**. "This report was our contribution to the ongoing conversation on this issue."

"This report is a great example of our educational philosophy in action — this is engaged teaching and learning in service of society," said **Michael J. Yelnosky, dean of the RWU School of Law**. "Moreover, it is the kind of valuable collaboration that is facilitated by the presence of our immigration clinic and the Latino Policy Institute at our facility at One Empire Street. And perhaps most importantly, the study is a fine piece of analysis that should inform discussions about this important public policy issue."

A panel discussion discussing the report Thursday morning at the RWU Providence campus on One Empire St. Panelists included Central Falls police chief James J. Mendonca; Providence director of economic opportunity Brian Hull; executive director of the ACLU's Rhode Island affiliate, Steven Brown; RWU law Professor Deborah Gonzalez and Latino Policy Institute researcher J. Alejandro Tirado-Alcaraz.